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ABSTRACT

Corporal punishment and its implications are discussed in this speech in Dallas, where corporal punishment is officially sanctioned as a method of school discipline, and in many other parts of the country, the prevailing opinion is that corporal punishment is necessary, effective and harmless. But the effectiveness of such punishment is dubious and the potential psychological harm is incalculable. Physical abuse is considered by many to be an acceptable form of school discipline because it is an accepted child-rearing practice. Teachers and parents are reluctant to change this behavior because violence is condoned and rewarded by this society, it is felt, and people are frequently tempted to respond to conflict and frustration with physical force. School policy that condones the bully tactics of corporal punishment is in effect teaching students by example that this is an acceptable way of handling problems. Through corporal punishment parents and teachers relieve their own frustrations and avoid effort to understand the reasons for the child's misbehavior. Corporal punishment is frequently used for transgression of arbitrary, meaningless rules. Teachers using corporal punishment should examine their motives and consider what sort of model they should be providing students. Corporal punishment undermines a child's self-respect and respect for others. A resolution passed at the National Conference on Corporal Punishment recommends abolishing this sort of punishment. (KM)

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Disciplinary Practices in Dallas Contrasted with School Systems with Rules Against Violence Against Children

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As mental health professionals and behavioral scientists, we are all well acquainted with the fact that reality is often not the same for observers belonging to different groups and in my own view, at least one purpose of this symposium is to present a more humane and enlightened perspective on reality, one which is both morally and pragmatically defensible as opposed to one which is rooted in ignorance and the perpetuation of destructive, outmoded cultural traditions.

It is not only disconcerting but shocking to realize that at this point in our history as a nation, an era marked by heretofore impossible technological feats and remarkable cultural sophistication in many areas, the primitive and anachronistic practice of inflicting physical pain and punishment upon children not only continues to exist in the home, in our schools, in child care facilities, in juvenile detention homes, and in other settings-----not only continues to exist but far too prevalently is officially sanctioned and condoned as well as looked upon as a <u>desirable</u> method of "discipline." Committing himself to the use of physical force via the use of paddlings in the Dallas school system, the superintendent of schools has been quoted as maintaining that if the policy of corporal punishment were removed, he would not want to remain as superintendent. This statement could not have been made without public support and unfortunately Dallas is not unique in this regard. In Dallas at least, as in many other parts of the country, the prevailing opinion is that corporal punishment in the schools is necessary, that it is effective in achieving its aims and that it does little or no harm in any case. I would argue that, on the contrary, the effectiveness of these techniques is very

dubiously successful in achieving the very limited goal of "classroom stability" while the potential harm to the child's emotional and intellectual stability is incalculable.

Based on a recent major nationwide survey of child abuse, Dr. David Gil of Brandeis University[1] reports "strong support for considering child abuse as endemic in American society" with the survey indicating that "several millions of children may be subjected every year to a wide range of physical abuse, though only several thousand suffer serious physical injury and a few hundred die as a consequence of abusive attacks." Against the background of public sanction of the use of violence against children and the endemic scope of the prevalence of such cases, it should surprise no one that extreme incidents will occur from time to time in the course of "normal" child rearing practices. Asserting that "violence against children constitutes a severe infringement of their rights as members of society," and tracing the common cause of all physical abuse of children back to the cultural sanctions of the use of physical force in child rearing, Dr. Gil proposes efforts "aimed at gradually changing this aspect of the prevailing child rearing philosophy, and developing clear-cut cultural prohibitions and legal sanctions against such use of physical force as a means of producing over time the strongest possible reduction of the incidence and prevalence of physical abuse of children."

Despite a growing rejection of the use of corporal punishment, as exemplified by the fact that at least two states (New Jersey and

Maryland) have outlawed this practice in their school systems and that it has been banned in several cities such as New York, Washington, D. C., Boston, Pittsburg, Baltimore, and Chicago, it has continued to flourish in places such as Dallas where four school board candidates favoring the use of corporal punishment and "tougher" discipline were elected during the past year to preside over a school system which in the past year had over 20,000 cases of reported paddlings and numerous instances of resulting serious physical injuries. Parenthetically, it might be noted that Texas has been found to rank number one in child abuse[2] with the rate for Dallas almost double the rate of the state as a whole. Regrettably, there is ample evidence to suggest that throughout our society, there is at best only partial acceptance of the notion that violence, herein conceptualized as destructive aggression which involves inflicting physical and psychological damage upon another as well as infringing upon human rights[3,4] is in the long run maladaptive and self-defeating. A 1970 Gallup poll,[5] for instance, found that 62% of the people surveyed favored "spanking and similar forms of physical punishment" in the lower grades. In the same poll 53% said that discipline in the schools was "not strict enough" and only 2% thought it was "too strict." In a 1969 survey conducted by the National Education Association, 65% of the elementary school teachers polled and 55% of the secondary school teachers said they favored "judicious use" of violent bodily punishment in their respective levels of school.[6]

Aside from the fact that violence as a method of coping or of avoiding coping is deeply embedded in the fabric of our country's values

and that the arbitrary use of physical force in dealing with others is often not only condoned but rewarded, it is by no means difficult to understand why many teachers and parents are reluctant to examine or change this behavior. As human beings, all of us are frequently tempted to respond to frustrating situations and interpersonal conflict with physical force. We are especially tempted when the people with whom we are in conflict are smaller and weaker than we are and when we can do so with impunity and justify the action by telling ourselves that it served the best interests of the child. In most cases, however, common sense and the rules of a civilized society do not permit us to settle differences by aggressing physically against the object of our frustration. Common sense tells us that other adults simply would not allow themselves to be subjected to physically abusive treatment without retaliating in kind. How many of us would voluntarily subject ourselves to the pain of a wooden paddle following a disagreement with our employer? The point is, very clearly, that in an adult world physical ways of handling conflicts are usually neither available nor permissible, let alone acceptable. Thus, an official school policy which condones bully tactics is in effect teaching students by example that this is an acceptable way of handling problems. Having been taught the efficacy of rule by bully, it should not surprise us that such children will subsequently apply that rule in their dealings with others, weaker than themselves, and continue to perpetuate the myths that reliance on physical force is the mark of manliness and that might makes right.

Along these lines, Bandura and Walters[7,8] who have emphasized

the importance of imitation or modeling in the learning of violence, point to considerable evidence which shows that physically aggressive-punitive parents tend to have physically aggressive children. In general it has been found that punishment by an authority figure seems to inhibit direct violence toward the punitive person and is associated with high destructive aggression toward other possible targets.

The ineffectiveness of corporal punishment can be understoon in the context of its being a very simplistic and indiscriminate remedy for a variety of differing kinds of problems. At the expense of the child, the teacher or parent can in this way drain off his or her own frustrations while being relieved of the burden of exercising patience and emotional restraint, and of attempting to understand the reasons for the child's misbehavior. The classroom situation is analogous to the home situation and the child who is experiencing emotional difficulty at home will, in all probability, repeat the pattern at school. It is this child especially who is in need of rational, consistent and firm but compassionate discipline. "Clobbering" this type of child can only intensify and further complicate his real problems while instilling either fear or a smouldering and long lasting resentment against adults and against school. Frequently, the child who consistently misbehaves or expresses his feelings in a manner which hurts either himself or others is telling us that he needs help badly. The classroom teacher can ignore him, punish him, or he can attempt to understand and help him. As has been pointed out by others,[9] corporal punishment is no less destructive and ineffective with such other types of children as "(a) delinquent

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children, whose code of violence is only further enhanced by spanking; (b) suspicious children, who provoke the adult to 'prove' his enemy status in their eyes; (c) children who are having trouble in the learning process and who express their frustration, anxiety or guilt in aggressive actions which draw punishment, which then further alienates them from learning; and (d) the 'cash and carry' customer who cheerfully submits to punishment so that he can continue a pattern of irresponsibility for his own actions."

Thus while physical punishment may intimidate a child or adolescent temporarily, it by no means represents a workable solution to the problems of misbehavior in the classroom. As McElvaney[10] has pointed out:

> "It has been repeatedly observed that the same children are paddled (spanked, whipped, hit) over and over again. The evidence implies that corporal punishment does not work. Some studies have shown that corporal punishment is not effective in reducing behavior problems. Others have indicated that schools using corporal punishment have more behavior problems."

It may be often overlooked as well that many of the "crimes" for which children are punished may be no fault of the child or may herald back to his home management. Among other kinds of offenses, children are punished at school for clumsiness, bad writing, overactivity or poor concentration, difficulties over which they may have little ostensible control. Reporting on corporal punishment abuses in the Dallas school system, the Dallas Morning News (May 23, 1971) noted that:

> ".....Dallas teachers.....readily talk about spanking students for misspelling words, inattentiveness and failure to say 'sir' among other transgressions. One

> teacher at Stockard Junior High.....has what he calls 'double stamp day' on Wednesdays. A student's transgressions are punishable on that day by double the number of licks administered during the remainder of the week. I do what I call 'warming them up' with five or six taps and then give one hard lick, the teacher said. Students are spanked in front of the room at the conclusion of the class for failure to say 'sir,' entering the class with shirttails out, or throwing at and missing the wastepaper basket, he said....."

Other examples of capriciously irresponsible exercise of authority are only too plentiful. The Dallas Morning News of May 14, 1971, reported on the proceedings of a case heard in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Texas. A series of witnesses reported several instances of physical abuse against students:

> "One witness, Roderick Oliver, 16, testified he was knocked unconscious last year by a teacher who objected when he re-entered Sarah Zumwalt Junior High School after school for a drink of water. Oliver's father said under cross examination.....that the teacher told him his son cursed him before he swung at the boy.....Walter Kaspareit, the swimming coach, said he had whipped him (Douglas Ware, one of the two plaintiffs) in excess of a dozen times with a shoe and a paddle for failure to pay a towel fee, being late to workouts and not bringing equipment."

When the teachers of a school system are demanding authority to engage in acts of physical punishment, the administration should study conditions as they currently exist in the schools. Each teacher should, especially if burdened with frustrating personal problems, be conscious of whether he or she is inclined to interpret classroom problems as a personal threat, whether he or she is likely to inflict punishment primarily in order to protect his or her own self-esteem, whether he or she is more inclined to react in a personal, retaliatory manner rather than

considering the causes of disruptive behavior in a fairly objective, clear-headed manner, and whether he or she derives a perverted sexual satisfaction from inflicting physical punishment. "Rarely if ever," maintains Dr. Gil, in discussing the issue of violence against children, "is corporal punishment administered for the benefit of an attacked child, for usually it serves the immediate needs of the attacking adult who is seeking relief from his uncontrollable anger and stress."[11]

Additionally, teachers might examine the extent to which they know and accept each child as a person; are able to and attempt to identify the child with a personality maladjustment early; differentiate instruction to meet individual needs; provide a worthy model for pupils to imitate, and involve the pupil in the improvement of his own behavior.

The issue is not whether children require discipline, structure and limit-setting. Children do need discipline but our aim should be to teach them to behave well because they want to or because they want the approval of those they love or respect. Corporal punishment and many forms of mental punishment as well, such as ridicule, sarcasm, belittling and shaming cannot help but undermine the child's self-respect and sense of security as well as erode or destroy respect for the adult who employs these tactics. It can only serve the best interests of all concerned to realize that corporal punishment in the schools or elsewhere, rather than being a solution to problems, is a serious problem in itself. A resolution which was passed at the National Conference on Corporal Punishment on May 7th of this year, a conference sponsored by the ACLU and the American Orthopsychiatric Association in conjunction with the NEA Task

Force on Corporal Punishment represents an encouraging step in the direction of enlightened change. The resolution, in part reads as follows:

> "The use of physical violence on school children is an affront to democratic values and an infringement of individual rights. It is a degrading, dehumanizing and counterproductive approach to the maintenance of discipline in the classroom and should be outlawed from educational institutions as it has already been outlawed from other institutions in American society."

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